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Robert Funseth

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Refugee Resettlement in the Heartland of America

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Following is an address by Robert Funseth, Senior Deputy Assistant Secretary for Refugee Programs, at the Multi-State Refugee Conference, St. Louis, Missouri, June 4, 1986.

My message to you this morning is that refugees still need the hospitality of the heartland of America and that this heartland still needs to experience the enrichment the refugees' presence brings to its daily life.

America's heartland has been the biblical "good land" of the Old Testament for millions of refugees—for your grandparents and mine in the 1880s and for those that followed them in the 1980s.

This conference comes on the occasion of two centennials: one nationwide—the national celebration on the Fourth of July of the unveiling 100 years ago, in 1886, of the Statue of Liberty; and the other a very personal celebration for me—the arrival 100 years ago, in June 1886, of my grandparents, Karl and Kristina, to this heartland from Sweden's northland. (They homesteaded in northern Minnesota, where they were among the pioneers who settled in the area around the present town of Roseau.)

We Americans—especially those familiar with the settlement of this part of the country—have a profound understanding of what it can mean to pull up roots in one land and of what a heart-wrenching experience it can often be to transplant them in a new land. Vilhelm Moberg, the author of *The Emigrants*, captured this theme in his saga about the resettlement in this heartland of a Swedish emigrant husband and wife, also named Karl and Kristina, in the middle of the last century. Moberg's Kristina—like so many who followed in her footsteps since—was gripped by a longing for her home in Sweden and could only find relief by reminding herself that:

> ...her children would never have to go through the pain of longing which she now went through. [H]er longing would never afflict them, no vivid memories from a past life in another country would plague them. Once they were grown they would never know any other life than the one lived here. [H]er children and her children's children would never, as she did, remember trees and bushes they had planted in a far-off land, they would not ask, Do they still bud and bloom in spring, do they carry their fruit in fall? They would never, as she did, lie awake nights and gaze into the dark for that land where spring evenings are light.
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> The ones she had borne into the world, and the ones they in turn would bear, would from the beginning of their lives say what her own tongue was unable to say: *At home* here in America—*back there* in Sweden.

There are still Karls and Kristinas coming into your midst in this heartland, escaping to this good land from Indochina, Afghanistan, Africa, Latin America, Iran, the Soviet Union, and Eastern Europe.

There are still Kristinas among you—who suffer silently the pain of longing for a home forever lost—who need your understanding and patience.

There are still children of these Karls and Kristinas among you who need your guidance and patience to make them truly feel *at home here in America*.

This is the challenge and opportunity that the Statue of Liberty symbolizes for us today and as we move toward refugee resettlement in the heartland and elsewhere in America in the 1990s.

U.S. Refugee Program: A National Effort

We strive in the Department of State to represent all of you—for America's refugee program is truly a national effort—seeking to achieve a humanitarian goal.

The Refugee Act—our national charter for the refugee program—adopted into law in 1980, defined this goal as follows:

> The Congress declares that it is the historic policy of the United States to respond to the urgent needs of persons subject to persecution in their homelands, including, where appropriate, humanitarian assistance for their care and maintenance in asylum areas, efforts to promote opportunities for resettlement or voluntary repatriation, aid for necessary transportation and processing, admission to this country of refugees of special humanitarian concern to the United States, and transitional assistance to refugees in the United States. The Congress further declares that it is the policy of the United States to encourage all nations to provide assistance and resettlement opportunities to refugees to the fullest extent possible.
>
> The objectives of this Act are to provide a permanent and systematic procedure for the admission to this country of refugees of special humanitarian concern to the United States, and to provide comprehensive and uniform provisions for the effective resettlement and absorption of those refugees who are admitted.

This is the goal of the President; this is the goal of the Congress; and this is the goal of the American people.

Refugees Need the Heartland

I believe President Reagan had this heartland in mind—this land of his roots—when he declared:

> Some believe the wellspring of American generosity is running dry. Nothing could be further from the truth. The drive of our people to assist refugees in need overseas and to resettle those who need it is an integral part of the American ethic. I am convinced that with God's help we will continue to meet our responsibilities to the world's refugees.

Whether we speak of the sponsorship committee of a church in the Dakotas helping a refugee family feel at home in America or one of the hundreds of English tutors in Iowa who volunteer their time—such personal commitments by individual Americans are what has made refugee resettlement so successful in this part of our country. Wherever the future lives of these refugees may take them—I assure you—the memory of your first extended hands of help and hospitality here in the heartland will remain with them forever.

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The Heartland Needs the Refugees

I know the people in your states appreciate that their humanitarian undertaking has been by no means a one-way street. I believe most of them feel that the heartland benefits from the enrichment the refugee's presence brings to their lives. The personal contributions which the refugees have brought to your states are now important and prized assets of each community. The benefits your children derive from growing up with youngsters from such diverse backgrounds overshadow, I hope, the challenge school districts have sometimes faced in providing the special services needed by the refugee children.

Regarding more tangible contributions, I am told that refugees resettled in your states have quickly taken note of the value Americans place on hard work. Despite severe economic difficulties in the farm belt and unemployment in your cities, overall refugee welfare dependency rates in this area are about half the national average, and the majority of your states actually showed considerable improvement in 1985. This is a significant achievement in which refugees, as well as those of you who assist them, can take justifiable pride. One particularly good example of this success can be found right here in St. Louis, where I understand over 60% of new arrivals are placed in stable employment situations within their first 6 months in the United States—and many of these within the first 30 days.

Primarily, however, the credit for this success story must be given to the refugees themselves—for it is their courage, hard work, and perseverance which enables them to overcome serious obstacles and a tragic history. Indeed, it is perhaps here—in the understanding and sharing of fundamental human values between refugees and their new American neighbors—that we find the key to the success of refugee resettlement in the heartland. This is why I believe that, while the refugees need the heartland, the heartland also needs the refugees.

Challenge for the Future

While we can be proud of all that has been accomplished, it is important to recognize that we all face a new set of serious challenges for the future. We face the harsh reality of a political world in which refugees are still the victims of repressive and brutal regimes. We see no early end of the domination of the states of Indochina by Hanoi, where repressive policies continue to cause thousands to endanger their lives in clandestine flight—more than 20,000 Vietnamese last year risked the dangerous escape by boat. Similarly, for Palestinian refugees in the Middle East, for Afghans in Pakistan, for refugees in Africa, Central America, the Soviet Union, and Eastern Europe—on all continents—individual human beings continue to suffer and have well-deserved fears of persecution should they remain in or attempt to return to their homelands.

There are today 10 million refugees around the world in desperate need of material and moral assistance from the international community—often the most basic food and medicine just to stay alive.

Resource Limitations

As we confront the starkness of this continuing human need, we must confront also the reality of a world where public and private resources are becoming increasingly limited.

In 1986, the budgetary situation of the U.S. Government is certainly a critical concern for any discussion of the American refugee program. In fiscal year (FY) 1985, the expenditures of the State Department for the U.S. refugee program totaled more than $390 million—of which more than two-thirds was committed to international refugee assistance and less than one-third for all aspects of the U.S. refugee admissions program. Despite the fact that the United States was able to sustain its contributions to international refugee assistance organizations at our traditional level of between 25% and 30% of total projected needs, these organizations experienced a serious shortage of funds from other sources which will continue into the foreseeable future.

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), in particular, sustained a $30-million shortfall in its general program funding in 1985 and has advised all donor governments that it may lack sufficient funding in 1986 to continue even the most basic forms of refugee assistance beyond meeting the life-sustaining essentials of food, shelter, and medical care.

And in the United States, the resources available to the bureau have been reduced by congressional mandate to a level of $324 million for FY 1986 (compared to the total expenditure level of $390 million in FY 1985). And the Congress may mandate greater cuts for FY 1987.

I emphasize this point for two reasons:

First, because I know you share the State Department's wider concern for the well-being of refugees wherever they may find themselves; and

Second, because in a future period of budgetary uncertainty—when the refugee program may be directed to bear a portion of the effort to reduce the Federal deficit—we face extremely difficult policy choices between applying very scarce dollars to fund the costs of a level of refugee admissions to the United States or applying those same dollars to meet severe international refugee relief requirements.

The dilemma is this: do we spend $100,000 to bring 60 more refugees to America or do we spend this same $100,000 to help feed and shelter many more than 60 refugees in camps in Asia, Africa, Central America, or the Middle East?

Refugee Resettlement

If 1986 marks an uncertainty about the availability of sufficient cash contributions from principal donor countries to the international refugee effort, 1986 may also mark an important and historic crossroad for the Indochinese refugee situation.

The year 1986 has already brought the report to the Secretary of State of the special Indochinese Refugee Panel—chaired by former Governor Robert Ray of Iowa—with recommendations for new refugee policy and program directions. In presenting the report to Secretary Shultz in April, Governor Ray's panel said it reached several general conclusions concerning the Indochinese refugee situation, including that:

> —[It] has changed significantly since . . . 1975.
>
> —The Indochinese fleeing today are no longer predominantly persons who were associated with the United States, nor does it appear that the majority have been singled out for harsher treatment than that generally suffered by the rest of the population. Far more appear to be taking this perilous journey in search of economic and political freedom or to be reunited with family members. Once having left, few can now return.
>
> —The presence already of so many Indochinese in the United States means that many now in their home countries and in first asylum are able to communicate with relatives in this country, and can be helped by friends and relatives when they are eventually resettled. This new situation has created a potential for greater reliance on normal immigration procedures . . . .

U.S. Admissions Policy—The New Situation

It is essential that we now develop refugee admissions policies and programs to reflect the new situation described by the Ray panel. In order to make maximum use of limited refugee admissions numbers, and as part of the effort to regularize the admissions of persons from Indochina, it is our intention to emphasize the use of immigrant visas for the admissions of individuals who seek to come to the United States

primarily for reasons of family reunification—an approach consistent with the panel's recommendations.

The difficulty with immigrant visa procedures—as we all know—is the waiting period which many must face. It is important to begin the process at the earliest possible date. Consequently, I wish strongly to recommend that you urge all former refugees in your states desiring to sponsor their relatives for admission to the United States to do two things:

First, bring their personal status up to date. Those who have been in the United States for 1 year are required to report to the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) for adjustment to permanent resident alien status; those who have been in the United States for more than 5 years are eligible to apply for citizenship.

Second, file the necessary documents with INS. There is no reason for them not to start as early as possible to complete forms and assemble required documents.

To those of you from mutual assistance associations and voluntary agencies—if you do not have staff expertise in immigration procedures, acquire it. One of the greatest services you can perform for the refugees is to provide informed counseling on the whole spectrum of immigration procedures.

Repayment of Refugee Transportation Loans

I would like to comment about the repayment of refugee transportation loans. As most of you know, the bureau pays the Intergovernmental Committee for Migration (ICM) in Geneva for the cost of reduced fare transportation to the United States. ICM issues loan notes which are signed by each adult refugee confirming their agreement to repay the amount in full.

As a result of close collaboration among ICM, the resettlement agencies, and the State Department during the past few years, the amount of collections has shown substantial improvement. Last year, about $13 million was repaid by refugees. Since 1952, when the loan fund was first established, through 1985 approximately $58.5 million was repaid by refugees, and of this amount nearly $34 million was repaid since 1983—reflecting the positive result of the special program to increase repayments.

While a portion of these repayments is used to offset costs incurred by the voluntary agencies in collecting the loans, the major portion is returned to ICM to cover the transportation of current refugee admissions. In these days of serious budget limitations flowing from the Balanced Budget and Emergency Deficit Control Act (Gramm-Rudman-Hollings), the repayments take on even more importance than before. The early and increased repayment of refugee loans can make a truly significant difference in the number of refugee admissions the Department can finance in the future. Your assistance in explaining to refugees presently in the United States how important it is to repay these loans could be critical.

The UNHCR Orderly Departure Program

I have been asked to talk about the UNHCR Orderly Departure Program (ODP). You will recall that the uncontrolled exodus of boat departures from Vietnam in 1978–79—which resulted in so much needless human suffering and death—prompted the international community to seek agreement from Hanoi to an orderly system of departure. The result was a Memorandum of Understanding signed in June 1979 by the UNHCR and Vietnam, creating the Orderly Departure Program from Vietnam. Since then, the ODP has provided for increasingly larger numbers of Vietnamese a safe means of leaving Vietnam as an alternative to the perilous, clandestine flight by boat or overland through the mine-infested fields along the Thai-Cambodian border. Over 100,000 Vietnamese have been able to leave Vietnam safely through this program—approximately half to the United States and half to the nearly 30 other participating countries.

Despite the unilateral Vietnamese suspension of processing new cases since January 1 of this year, departures from Vietnam in 1986 have remained close to what they were in the comparable period last year. This is because there is a sufficient pool of interviewed U.S. applicants to permit departures for the time being to continue. We are trying to persuade the Vietnamese to resume processing before any permanent damage to the program is done.

For the future, beyond the present suspension, we believe that the only way the ODP can continue to expand significantly is by increased use of the immigration route to bring about family reunification. All family reunification sponsors in your states—no matter what the stage of processing of their family's applications—should be advised to file immigrant visa petitions with the INS for family members. In the future, political and budgetary constraints probably will limit the refugee route to cases of special humanitarian concern to the United States—individuals who clearly face persecution because of their ties to the United States but who cannot qualify for immigrant visas. Meanwhile, the vast majority of Vietnamese refugees in the United States have now been here long enough to qualify for U.S. citizenship. As citizens, they should be urged to file immigrant visa petitions if they want their relatives to join them.

The Amerasian Children

There is a special humanitarian concern in this country for the children of American fathers and Vietnamese mothers—the Amerasians—born in Vietnam during the American presence. Most of them live with their mothers and other close family members, although some are orphans or have been abandoned. The difficulties of life endemic in today's Vietnam are even worse for Amerasian children who face special hardships because of their mixed racial background. Since September 1982—when the Vietnamese authorities accepted our proposal to permit ODP processing of Amerasians, their mothers, and other close family members for departure from Vietnam—approximately 3,500 Amerasian children and 4,900 family members have departed for resettlement in the United States for a total of 8,400 persons.

Last evening, I shared a traditional Vietnamese meal at the International Institute with some of these Amerasian children and their mothers whom we have resettled in St. Louis through the institute—a truly remarkable and impressive civic organization for which this community is justifiably proud. I heard firsthand from these Amerasians of their difficult life in Vietnam and how hard they and their mothers are now working—in the institute's day or evening English classes, at public schools, and in factories—so they can say with pride and confidence, at home here in St. Louis.

In September 1984, Secretary Shultz announced to the Congress on behalf of President Reagan that the United States would accept for admission, through the ODP over a 3-year period, all Amerasian children and their qualifying family members presently in Vietnam—reaffirming that they are of particular humanitarian concern to the United States because of their ties to our country. I have had the honor to head the U.S. delegations to these negotiations in Geneva since 1982 and to present the President's initiative to the Vietnamese delegation in 1984. The initial Vietnamese response to the presidential initiative for the Amerasians was encouraging. However, the present unilateral Vietnamese suspension of all processing in Ho Chi Minh City—if not lifted—will soon cause the departure of Amerasians to drop sharply. The Vietnamese informed us earlier this year that they had identified an additional

2,600 Amerasian cases for departure but so far have not responded positively to our request that processing resume for these children nor provided us with any of their names.

The "Reeducation Camp" Prisoners

In September 1984, Secretary Shultz also announced to the Congress, on behalf of President Reagan, a special humanitarian initiative to bring 10,000 political prisoners presently and previously confined in the so-called reeducation camps and their immediate families to the United States over a 2-year period. The presidential initiative—declaring these persons are, like the Amerasians, also of particular humanitarian concern to the United States—was presented during the same 1984 meeting with the Vietnamese in Geneva. Although the Vietnamese agreed to consider the new U.S. proposal, they have, since that time, rebuffed all of our diplomatic efforts to engage them in substantive negotiations to implement this humanitarian initiative.

Secretary Shultz reaffirmed this presidential initiative to the Congress in September 1985 on the occasion of the Administration's presentation of the FY 1986 U.S. refugee admissions program. This reaffirmation was repeated in October 1985 to the Vietnamese when we again met with them in Geneva at the annual UNHCR ODP consultations.

We are deeply disappointed at the Vietnamese refusal to agree to release these long-persecuted and suffering persons for resettlement—persons imprisoned under extremely harsh and cruel conditions because of their prior association with the United States.

There is growing bipartisan concern in the Congress over this continued Vietnamese suspension of the ODP and bipartisan support for our diplomatic efforts to persuade the Vietnamese to lift their suspension.

On May 21, Senators DeConcini and Murkowski introduced a resolution[1] calling upon Vietnam:

> (1) to permit the immediate resumption of interviewing and processing of applicants in Vietnam...
>
> (2) to permit the orderly departure of "reeducation camp" prisoners, Amerasian children, and other persons of special humanitarian concern to the United States.

In his remarks to the Senate in support of his resolution, Senator DeConcini said:

> Regrettably, on January 1, 1986, the SRV [Socialist Republic of Vietnam] unilaterally suspended UNHCR interviewing and processing of applicants in Ho Chi Minh City for departure to the United States. This resolution is intended to send a strong signal to the SRV that the suspension of the interviewing and processing of applicants is a matter of grave humanitarian concern to the U.S. Government and the U.S. Congress. It is extremely important that the SRV know that the executive and legislative branches of our Government speak with a strong and united voice on this important issue.

Refugee Reception and Placement

Finally, having begun with the subject of successful refugee resettlement, let me conclude by identifying one more important challenge. Simply put, in a period of declining refugee arrivals, how do we sustain the achievement of the last decade in which we together—the private and public sectors in this country—succeeded in developing a truly national response in resettling more than 1 million refugees.

How do we preserve the capacity of this national refugee resettlement structure to respond to some unforeseen, future emergency, where large-scale refugee admissions might again become a national imperative?

One essential element, I believe, is better planning of initial refugee placement. Presently, the State Department is engaged in a discussion with the national voluntary refugee resettlement agencies to improve our ability to evaluate successful placement programs. But we need to hear from the States and local communities as well. Are there still concerns in 1986 regarding impacted sites? If so, let us hear about them. On the other side, are there States which see themselves as offering good locations for continued or increased numbers of refugees but where voluntary agencies are reducing their placements of refugees? If so, let us hear about them. And finally, if there are sites where there is a need for initial resettlement services but no agency present to provide them—for an area which receives, for example, only small numbers of family reunion cases—let us hear about them, too.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I recall what President Reagan said about the American refugee program in 1985:

> Since World War II, the United States, time and again, has offered haven to those fleeing oppression and persecution—Hungarians, Cubans, Indochinese, and so many others. Our efforts to rescue refugees and provide them the opportunity to construct new lives have been richly rewarded by the loyalty and industry of these new citizens.
>
> America is also the largest single provider of assistance to refugees in every region of the world. Our program of refugee resettlement exceeds that of the rest of the world combined. These are deeds in which I as President, and Americans everywhere, take great pride.

For those of you who have visited the Bureau for Refugee Programs, perhaps you recall that as you enter our office at the State Department, the first object you see on the wall is a striking silhouette of the Statue of Liberty—photographed in the dawn's early light. Etched in white on this magnificent picture are those memorable, challenging words of Emma Lazarus about those "yearning to be free" and "Send them... to me, I lift my lamp beside the Golden Door."

When the Statue of Liberty's torch is relighted next month, may its light not only shine bright as a beacon for those who still yearn to be free, and who seek refuge in the safe harbor and haven that is America, but may it also inspire each of you—as you extend your helping hands and open the "Golden Doors" of your hearts and homes to those who continue to seek refuge in this good land—in the American heartland. ■

[1] On June 5, Representative Bilirakis introduced the same resolution in the House of Representatives.

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